NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 1-9962 JANUARY 14, 1976
CHARLES MEDD

POLITICAL CARTOONS: 100 YEARS AFTER THOMAS NAST

ANNCR:

FOR MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED YEARS, THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY HAS BEEN SYMBOLIZED BY THAT STUBBORN AND NOT OVERLY INTELLIGENT ANIMAL, THE DONKEY. IT ALL BEGAN WITH A DRAWING THAT APPEARED IN AN INFLUENTIAL MAGAZINE OF ANOTHER ERA -- HARPER'S WEEKLY. THE DATE: JANUARY 15, 1870. THE ARTIST: THOMAS NAST, PERHAPS THE GREATEST IN A LONG LINE OF AMERICAN POLITICAL CARTOONISTS. CHARLES MEDD HAS A BACKGROUND REPORT ON THE CRAFT MADE FAMOUS BY THOMAS NAST.

VOICE:

THOMAS NAST WAS NOT AMERICA'S FIRST POLITICAL CARTOONIST. THAT HONOR -- LIKE SO MANY OTHERS -- BELONGS TO BENJAMIN FRANKLIN WHOSE WELL-REMEMBERED SKETCHES HELPED INSPIRE SOME EARLY REVOLUTIONARY SPIRIT. NOR WAS THE DONKEY THE ONLY LASTING CONTRIBUTION THOMAS NAST MADE TO POLITICAL SATIRE. A FEW YEARS LATER, HE CREATED AN EQUALLY UNFLATTERING, AND EQUALLY ENDURING, SYMBOL FOR THE REPUBLICAN PARTY, THE CUMBERSOME ELEPHANT THAT IS TOO BURDENED WITH MEMORIES TO ENTERTAIN NEW IDEAS.

IT WAS ALSO THOMAS NAST WHO CONCEIVED OF THAT LONG-LEGGED, BEADED INDIVIDUAL KNOWN WITH A COMBINATION OF RIDICULE AND AFFECTION AS UNCLE SAM. BUT IN HIS LONG AND ILLUSTRIOUS CAREER, NAST CONTRIBUTED FAR MORE THAN A SERIES OF SATIRICAL SYMBOLS. HIS UNRELENTING ATTACKS HELPED UNDERMINE A CORRUPT POLITICAL ORGANIZATION IN NEW YORK CALLED TAMMANY HALL. IN TIME,

THE TAMMANY CHIEF WOULD COMPLAIN THAT WHILE MOST OF HIS IMMIGRANT FOLLOWERS COULD NOT READ, THEY COULD UNDERSTAND -- IN HIS WORDS -- "THEM DAMN PICTURES."

WHAT THOMAS NAST DID TO TAMMANY HALL, OTHER CARTOONISTS HAVE SINCE BEEN DOING -- OR TRYING TO DO -- TO A LONG LIST OF PUBLIC FIGURES. THE COLLECTIVE INTENT: TO EXPOSE THE FOLLY AND FAILURES OF POLITICIANS AND STATESMAN. THEIR PRINCIPLE WEAPON IS HUMOR, DIRECTED AT A PARTICULAR TARGET BY RIDICULE, WHICH -- ACCORDING TO A CONTEMPORARY PRACTITIONER -- "IS ONE OF THE STRONGEST FORMS OF INDICTMENT."

THE PAST FEW YEARS HAVE BROUGHT ABOUT IN THIS COUNTRY WHAT SOME ARE CALLING THE "GOLDEN AGE" OF POLITICAL CARTOONING. THE UPHEAVALS OVER CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE VIETNAM WAR, FOLLOWED BY THE WATERGATE SCANDAL, HAVE PRODUCED A NATIONAL MOOD OF CYNICISM, AN IDEAL CLIMATE FOR THE DESCENDENTS OF THOMAS NAST. THEIR PICTURES -- FOUND ON THE EDITORIAL PAGES OF NEARLY EVERY AMERICAN NEWSPAPER -- TELL THE STORY AT A GLANCE.

FOR A CARTOONIST, THE KEY TO SUCCESS LIES IN HIS ABILITY TO TOUCH THE VIEWER'S SENSE OF HUMOR. FOR A POLITICIAN, THE EFFECT CAN BE DAMAGING, EVEN DEVASTATING, FOR WHILE PUBLIC FIGURES CAN STAND A VARIETY OF CRITICISM, BEING LAUGHED AT IS ANOTHER MATTER. AND AS THE BOSS OF TAMMANY HALL SAID MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO, THE PEOPLE MAY NOT UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING THEY READ, BUT THEY SURE CAN UNDERSTAND "THEM DAMN PICTURES."

MAH/PBM/PY/CAK